

The Name of Palladio

Srdjan Zlokapa

1 The main source of information for this article is the catalog of the exhibition on Palladio that took place between Vicenza and London in 2008/09 curated by Giovanni Beltramini and Howard Burns. Most of the information about the life of Palladio and the whole story of the Apparato Ridolfi are taken from Beltramini's introduction to the first part of the catalog "Andrea Palladio 1508, 1580."

2 Palladio was a master of superimpositions. An example where Palladio has to superimpose the facade of the church with the one of the temple, as in the church of Vicenza in occasion of the "Apparato Ridolfi", is his late masterpiece, the church of the "Redentore." The problem is that the three naves church space generates a stepped shape in the facade that can't be covered by a temple front. Palladio's solution would be using two overlapping temple facades at two heights in order to cover the naves.

In his monographic work about Palladio, Guido Beltramini recounts the story of the architect with a masquerade. On 10 September 1543, the gothic city of Vicenza transforms itself into ancient Rome for just one night. Giangiorgio Trissino and Andrea Palladio design a set of wooden architectural "Folies" to celebrate Cardinal Niccolò Ridolfi's entrance in the city.

What is left of the "Apparato Ridolfi" is nothing more than some letters and a sketch. We know only that, along the path of the Cardinal, Palladio and Trissino staged a city tour that was supposed to mix reality with fiction. The ensemble was composed of an entrance archway, an artificial cave with a fountain representing the rivers of the city, some colossal statues and a wooden temple-like facade that covered the gothic cathedral of Vicenza with statues of Faith, Hope and Charity as acroteria figures.¹

What is striking about this scarcely-documented project is its ambition: Palladio and Trissino did not just want to please an important guest through a revival of the past; they wanted to build an ephemeral depiction of a new idea of a city that could replace Vicenza. This project, more than just cosmetic, was dynamite.

It is interesting to see how the fragile, temporary and fake nature of the project makes its message stronger: the superimposition² of a fictional city over an exist-

ing one provides a built utopia, a visualization of an alternative present.

Trissino, the co-author of the "Apparato" was a reformer. Through his work, he supported the invention of Italian language and supported the unification of measures in the mosaic of countries that Italy was at the time. Building was one of his many interests and, like a lot of other intellectuals of the time, he endorsed a return to the principles of ancient Roman architecture.

Trissino can also be seen as the talent scout that invented Palladio. Just a couple of years before the "Apparato," Palladio was known as Andrea the Stonemason (Andrea di Pietro Tagliapietra). Trissino introduced Palladio to Humanism, to his first clients and travelled with him to Rome. Even the name "Palladio" was Trissino's invention. It is a classical, ancient name for an architect that, in the eyes of Trissino, had to bring the Humanist reform to the field of architecture. Palladio is a programmatic name that already suggests the intention of his work.

The invention of the mask "Palladio" is one of the first known examples of branding in architecture. By adopting an ancient name, Palladio evokes, for himself and for his work, the "classical" virtues of rationality and controlled beauty. Until this moment, artists typically selected nicknames that would refer to their ori-

gins: Raffaello Sanzio was the son of Giovanni Santi, and Leonardo da Vinci came from the town of Vinci. In Palladio's case, the name has nothing to do with his origins but rather with the intentions of his work.

On the other hand, "I Quattro Libri dell'architettura," the book where Palladio compiles his projects, can be seen as the construction of a portrait or of an architectural myth. It is one of the first architecture monographs. Palladio gave so much importance to it that he bought the copper plates of the book in order to print his work himself and keep the publisher in his shadow. The projects are shown free from the context in which they were built, clients are often not mentioned and, the host city is omitted, such is in the project of the Rialto bridge, where any reference to Venice is missing. The plans are also adjusted in order to explain the principle of the project more than to describe the building in itself. Like the fiction behind the invented name Palladio, the fiction behind the omissions and adjustments of the "Quattro Libri" are also functional to the promotion of an idea of architecture. The drawings of the buildings are not just descriptions of an existing building: they are meant to be reproduced and to inspire. The "Quattro Libri" is a collection of archetype-typologies where every typology is a brick of a bigger project of reform of the human environment.

Fiction, in the case of the "Quattro Libri," is an important tool to generate an ideal world out of a collection of projects. For Palladio, the repetition of the ancient Roman past was not a nostalgic carnival but a critique of the present and a proposal for the future: he was interested in understanding the principles of the past in order to create new principles for the future.

The last project of Palladio, the "Teatro Olimpico" in Vicenza, faces this situation and, at the same time, is closely related to the "Apparato Ridolfi." The "Teatro" can be seen as the construction of a Palladian world in the scale of a single room. Palladio's approach to this renovation and extension project makes use of the wo-

den facades of his earlier project, the "Apparato Ridolfi," which become the wooden scene behind the stage. An ideal city (maybe the dream of Palladio's Vicenza?) appears as a trompe-l'oeil through the arches of the theatrical scenery. The whole theater can be seen as a step back from the ambitions of Palladio and Trissino. The old Palladio does not aim anymore to transform the whole Venetian republic as in the early times when he was dreaming about classical bridges in Venice.³ In the "Teatro" the classical reformation takes place as a theatrical illusion between the four walls of a former prison.

But even though Venice remained a gothic city, Palladio's reformation dreams would not be completely disappointed. His imagined world and his teachings would sprout in far away lands followed above all by anglo-saxon architects.⁴ In the 18th century especially, churches, villas and universities would look Palladian and entire cities would be built following the rules of Palladio. The wooden Facades of the Teatro Olimpico and of the "Apparato" in Vicenza would become the real city of Bath where also the unbuilt project of the Rialto Bridge was realized.

Seen with our contemporary eyes it looks almost as if the imagined city of Palladio gained its own life and continued to produce after the death of its master, demonstrating the power of Palladio's fictional world.

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³ The classical project of the Rialto Bridge will be supported by Palladio's influent noble clients but would never be accepted by the city. There is also a surviving letter in which Palladio wishes for very drastic renovation of the Palazzo Ducale. The architect finds the gothic building very ugly and suggests the construction of a classical ersatz. This proposal would also never be accepted.

⁴ A large portion of Palladio's drawings were acquired by English noblemen such as Inigo Jones and Lord Burlington, and served as inspiration in England, Russia America and many other countries. For instance, Palladio's influence can be admired in the Pronaos of the Chiswick House in Middlesex, in the Villa Pavlovsk in Saint Petersburg or in the Villa Monticello of Thomas Jefferson.